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SUBJECT: UFC LEADERSHIP IN CAMPAIGN MODE, UNLIKELY TO ENTER
UNITY GOVERNMENT

REF: 06 LOME 1277

Classified By: Ambassador David Dunn, Reasons 1.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) Summary. The Union of Forces for Change (UFC), arguably the largest opposition party in Togo, has ruled out participating in the national unity government formed last September. The unity government's primary mandate is to prepare for free and fair legislative elections in 2007. Although the UFC has declined to join government, it will continue to have a role in other transitional institutions, notably the national electoral commission (CENI) and the follow-up committee to the National Dialogue. Party leaders prefer this half-in, half-out status for reasons of principle, practicality, and political expediency, but it is not without risks for Togo and the UFC itself. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Conversations with UFC party leaders have revealed that the party will not join the unity government formed in the wake of last year's National Dialogue and is aligning its campaign strategy for upcoming legislative elections accordingly. In an unguarded moment, Eric Amerding, the brother-in-law, confidant, and close adviser ("the only person who can tell Gilchrist what he doesn't want to hear") of party president Gilchrist Olympio told Ambassador in mid-January that, "From the beginning, we did not want to join government."

¶3. (C) Olympio, too, has told us that he sees a tactical advantage in remaining outside government (ref). Indeed, in an interview published in the February 5 edition of the opposition biweekly "Forum de la Semaine," he declared that the opposition was more effective on the outside, where it could freely criticize the government's policies. He distanced himself in the interview from the other two "radical" opposition parties (and erstwhile UFC running mates), the CAR, headed by PM Yawovi Agboyibo, and the CDPA, headed by Leopold Gnininvi, both of whom have joined the national union government. Should one or both decide to leave government, Olympio added, they would be welcomed with open arms by the UFC.

¶4. (C) Olympio's initial, angry reaction to the appointment by President Faure of Agboyibo as prime minister last September -- when Olympio told a French journalist that the UFC would not accept a seat in a cabinet led by anyone other than a UFC prime minister -- prompted a series of contacts and negotiations between the Togolese presidency and the UFC over the possible inclusion of UFC members in Agboyibo's

government. Regional leaders, notably Obasanjo and Compaore, pressed the Togolese parties for such an outcome, a message we reinforced. The negotiations eventually floundered over the proximate issue of exactly which ministerial portfolios would go to the UFC. Despite having told Ambassador Dunn and Embassy Paris Africa watchers in October that he would join government in return for a "super" ministry with responsibility for implementing the National Dialogue's Global Political Agreement, when offered just that (plus two lesser ministries), Olympio declined. This was confirmed to us separately by Amerding, Cooperation Minister Gilbert Bawara, and Olympio himself. Bawara recently told us that the GOT has not given up its efforts, even if the UFC is not receptive.

15. (C) The decision by the UFC leadership to forego a role in government was not embraced universally within the UFC. Party chapters outside Lome in particular voiced unhappiness with Gilchrist's hasty reaction, which in their view was a missed opportunity both to help shape the electoral framework and to provide jobs and benefits to UFC activists long-excluded from the benefits of office. Eric Amerding (protect) told the Ambassador before the UFC's executive committee meeting February 3 and 4 that the party leadership had to squelch an attempt by younger members to include the topic of party "modernisation" on the agenda, which he described with a nervous laugh as a euphemism for a critical appraisal of Gilchrist's leadership. He added that the rank-ordering of candidate lists for each of Togo's constituencies (prefectures under the new, list-based proportional voting system) for the upcoming legislative elections will be decided by Gilchrist himself, an exercise that promises to be a further "headache" for the UFC leadership.

16. (C) Nor has the UFC's decision to boycott cabinet participation captured the imagination of the wider electorate. Gilchrist's visit to Togo from February 3 to 9

had two purposes -- to preside over the UFC executive committee meeting (above) and as a pre-launch of the party's legislative election campaign. Throughout his stay -- his longest in Togo since the early 90's -- Gilchrist's public appearances failed to attract the large crowds that characterized his infrequent visits to Lome in years past. About 250 greeted him when he arrived by road at the main Ghana border crossing, compared to past visits when his greeters were so numerous that the border was effectively shut down. A crowd estimated at 2500 to 3000 attended the only scheduled public rally of the visit, at a square in downtown Lome at the conclusion of the executive committee meeting. Spontaneous gatherings in Aneho, a UFC stronghold at the coastal border with Benin, and in the central city of Atakpame, which experienced some of the worst of the political violence in 2005, attracted limited but enthusiastic throngs.

17. (C) While returning to Lome from Atakpame, Olympio's motorcade was involved in a high speed accident. It occurred when one of the vehicles braked to avoid an errant motorcyclist and was struck by another vehicle in the motorcade, causing one to overturn. Amerding suffered painful but not life-threatening injuries to his chest. The incident initially raised fears that history might be repeating itself, in light of an armed attack on Olympio's motorcade by Eyadema loyalists during a visit to central Togo in 1992 that left several people dead and Olympio seriously injured. When Olympio and his senior advisors met with us just prior to his departure from Togo on February 9, they characterized the recent incident as an accident and nothing more and noted that protection from GOT security services had been impeccable throughout Olympio's stay.

18. (C) Olympio's address marking the opening of the executive committee was the major policy pronouncement of his visit. It was a nuanced speech, alternating between criticism of the RPT's policies of exclusion and discrimination over the years and qualified support for last year's national dialogue and global political agreement, which he labelled as the "last

chance to reestablish confidence and peace among the Togolese people." He defended the UFC's decision to remain outside government and characterized the period leading up to legislative elections as one of "consultation and shared management" among the various Togolese parties. Olympio made no mention by name of President Faure Gnassingbe, which is just as well given his inclination to refer to Faure as "that boy" in private conversations. Uncharacteristically, he avoided the issues of military reform and bringing to justice those responsible for human rights abuses in the past, including attacks by security forces and militias loyal to the regime against opposition supporters during the protests that followed the 2005 presidential elections. Describing tactics, Olympio defined the UFC's pre-electoral priorities to include mobilizing resources, improving communications, protecting its candidates, and ensuring the security of polling materials and election results on the day of elections. He said the party would favor the role of youth, women, and Togolese abroad in its campaign platform, whose central theme would be ending the clan-based politics of repression of the past.

¶9. (C) Following its executive committee meeting, the UFC sent a letter to the Prime Minister's office recommending that the government undertake certain actions pertaining to implementation of the global political agreement. These included inviting the EU to help train Togolese security forces before the legislative elections. The PM's office responded with a letter questioning the appropriateness of the UFC's demarche, in light of its decision to boycott government and Olympio's comment to the press, clearly aimed at Prime Minister Agboyibo, that he preferred not to join those members of the opposition opting to try to change things from within. The PM's office made public its response, widening the controversy and prompting a barrage of editorials in the Togolese media.

¶10. (C) Comment. The UFC is feeling pressure from a number of fronts -- from the RPT, happy to exploit opposition missteps and divisions, e.g., the exchange of letters between the UFC and Agboyibo's office, from the other opposition parties, who are vying with the UFC for the broader opposition vote, from its own rank and file, who may be losing patience with Olympio's impulsive leadership, and from the broader Togolese population, hard pressed to understand why the UFC has not exploited what many see as an unprecedented opening as well

as why it appears intent on violating the spirit of the popular global political agreement. Exacerbating the UFC's problems is the credibility problem it created for itself when it declined to join the national unity government and, more recently, when it declared it would not abide by an agreement to settle differences within the national electoral commission by vote rather than consensus. This measure was adopted at the last meeting of the follow-up committee to the national dialogue chaired by President Compaore in Ouagadougou and was widely seen as the opposition's concession in a trade-off with the RPT over the question of photo-ID registration cards (Lome 0085).

¶11. (C) Comment continued. In our meeting with the UFC leadership at the conclusion of Olympio's visit, it was clear that in the face of these setbacks, the party has decided to dig in its heels rather than opt for a more conciliatory approach. Indeed, since its executive committee met, the UFC has become more contentious. If the UFC's electoral fortunes were all that mattered, we would not be overly concerned. It is the nature of politics for parties to take broad gambles, reaping the benefits if right and paying the price if wrong. The UFC's contrariness, however, has broader implications for democracy and stability. First, whether intentional or not, the UFC has created a stake for itself in the failure of the unity government and, by extension, the free, fair, and transparent electoral process that is the new government's primary mandate. This raises the prospect of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Second, and related to the first, the UFC has made no effort to find common ground with the other parties, particularly the RPT, on issues related to the

elections. Squabbling among the parties has slowed electoral preparations, increasing the likelihood of mistakes and/or manipulation as work plans become compressed. Rather than negotiating solutions among themselves, the Togolese parties are relying on President Blaise Compaore of Burkina Faso to force compromises. Not only are the Togolese denying themselves an important part of the democratization process, one must wonder how much time and patience Compaore, the national dialogue facilitator, will continue to demonstrate. Third, the UFC has estranged itself from its natural allies in the opposition, the CAR and CDPA. Opposition unity proved to be an important force in moving the RPT-dominated regime in the direction of democratic reform, i.e., through the national dialogue and global political agreement. Solidarity among the three main opposition parties may be needed once again to prevent backsliding, e.g., if the RPT fares poorly in the legislative elections and there is a backlash against Faure's policies from party hardliners. End comment.

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